

SEPTEMBER 12, 2000

SCHAKOWSKY'S ONE YEAR REVIEW OF CHICAGO INS

DETAILS MODEST IMPROVEMENTS BUT CALLS FOR MAJOR CHANGES

CHICAGO, IL - In a letter to Chicago Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Director Brian Perryman, U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) detailed her one year review of the Chicago INS. Schakowsky wrote that modest improvements have taken place, however, "[t]here are a number of issues that continue to be of concern to me and my constituents." Schakowsky focused on three areas: the Line, Application/Approval Process, and Detention.

Schakowsky is leading the effort to reform the Chicago INS and to ensure that customers receive the quality service they deserve. In addition, last year, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims held a field hearing in Chicago at the request of members of the Illinois delegation to examine what Schakowsky calls the "culture of the customer is always wrong" at the Chicago INS.

Below is Schakowsky's letter to the INS.

September 11, 2000

**Mr. Brian R. Perryman, District Director
Immigration and Naturalization Service, Chicago Region
10 W. Jackson, Suite 600
Chicago, IL 60604**

Dear Mr. Perryman:

This letter is a follow up to meetings, correspondence and last September's Congressional field hearing on Chicago's INS operations. As you know, many who testified at the field hearing shared horror stories of INS's inefficiency, rudeness, insensitivity, and incompetence. In written testimony, one of my constituents, Carrie Golus, from Chicago recounted the abuse, disrespect and incompetence she and her British-born husband experienced by the INS as they tried to obtain legal permanent resident status for him. While this may have been an extreme illustration of how a series of INS missteps affected a family, it unfortunately is not unique. Every day as a result of INS mistakes, families are disrupted and people are robbed of precious opportunities.

It has now been over a year since I first visited "the line" at 10 West Jackson and made suggestions for INS improvements. Since then, I am pleased to say that, under your leadership, modest improvements have been made to build a more customer-friendly atmosphere, reduce the line, make more information officers available, and increase the availability of forms. All of these improvements have resulted in improved service to customers at the district office and a slightly more positive feeling about the INS within the communities it serves. However, despite these improvements, there are a number of issues that continue to be of concern to me and my constituents. For the purposes of clarity, I have divided the issues into three areas: the Line, Application/Approval Process and Detention.

While I appreciate budget constraints that may hamper your ability to provide the optimal service that customers at the Chicago INS deserve, I would appreciate an update on the concerns raised in this letter. Please know that I am aware of your request for twelve additional INS officers to help deal with staffing shortages, and it is my understanding that you have been allocated four temporary officers from other offices. I would like an update as to the status of your staffing request and whether you have been told if the temporary assignments may continue through next year. In addition, I would appreciate your comments on the adequacy of staffing at the Lincoln Service Center since their activities affect your ability to adjudicate applications. I am anxious to work with you to secure sufficient staff to meet the needs of our constituents.

The Line

While my staff and immigrant advocates have done periodic checks at 10 West Jackson and have noticed some improvements, I'd like to take a moment to reiterate what is being done to minimize the line in an attempt to ensure that these improvements continue. It is my understanding that every morning an information officer distributes 600 tickets to customers, who are then escorted to the second floor to await service. Distributing the tickets in many instances eliminates, or at the very least reduces, the line outside the building at 10 West Jackson. In addition, information officers are available from 7:30am to 4pm and are more willing to engage customers in a helpful and respectful way. It is my hope that these practices will continue.

Access to information and forms needs further improvements. Although I believe this is the area in which you have made significant progress, especially with the addition of a kiosk to provide forms on the first floor, the partnership with public libraries to make forms available, and increased on-line access to certain forms, there are still areas that need improvement. Ensuring that the Chicago office has enough staff to handle the volume of requests is critical. This includes ensuring that telephone lines are open, available and answered in a timely and accurate manner and that all windows on the second floor are staffed with information officers able to provide accurate and courteous service. These steps will go a long way towards reducing the lines inside the building.

Finally, special consideration for the needs of elderly immigrants, women with small

children, and immigrants with disabilities is needed.[] As I stated at the field hearing, it is unreasonable and unacceptable to expect the elderly, and women with young children and persons with disabilities to be standing in lines and waiting in lobbies for hours at a time.[] They should be afforded a comfortable waiting area with appropriate chairs and easy access to rest rooms.[] This is not just a matter of convenience, but a recognition of the physical demands of protracted periods of standing in line.[] I understand that your intent was to build a room for this purpose but that progress has been hampered by space limitations.[] I would appreciate an update on this effort.[] Also, I find translation services to be inadequate and in need of improvement.[] Sign language interpreters and foreign language translators must be made available to immigrants who need their service.[] I am interested to know the status of your request for a multi-lingual video messaging system to better update information to customers in waiting areas.[] I believe these remedies would go a long way to alleviating complaints by immigrants who are deaf or hard of hearing and would help in maintaining compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.[]

Application/Approval Process

Excessive delays in processing leave people in limbo--they cannot work, travel, or reunite with spouses or family members.[] Lengthy delays and inconsistencies in INS processing have also taken a toll on businesses that need to hire workers.[] I appreciate the efforts you have made to address the backlogs and I believe some progress has been made.[] I would appreciate, however, your assessment of the length of time, under ideal circumstances, it should take INS to process N-400, N-600 and I-485 forms, and how long it currently takes your office to process them.[]

Another source of frustration for many immigrants is Chicago INS's propensity for losing and/or misplacing papers and applications.[] As a result of INS's disorganization, applicants are being forced to refile and repay fines.[] The INS needs to recognize when they are at fault and use their discretion to address applicants' concerns and financial needs, by expediting those processings and waiving additional fees.[] This is crucial to restoring a sense of fairness and respect among the immigrants and the communities you are charged with serving.[]

In addition, I have received complaints from a large number of constituents who are frustrated because they have written to the Chicago office with questions and inquiries and have not received any response.[] Please tell me what you are doing to strengthen INS's responses to mail.[] Is there at this time a dedicated unit working solely on correspondence?[] If there is not one, is this currently a priority for you?[] Immigrants should not have to have a congressional office make the request on their behalf in order for them to get an accurate and timely response.[]

As you know, a June 2000 Government Accounting Office Report found that the Chicago INS may have lost or misplaced 4,000 files when the transfer of data was made from Chicago to the Nebraska Service Center.[] I would like to know how many files have been lost or misplaced and if any of those files have since been accounted for.[] In addition,

for the applicants whose files were lost, do you have a mechanism in place to ensure that all those who applied for naturalization before July 1, 1998, are given interviews by September 30, 2000 as Headquarters had directed? □ □

□

Since the 1998 implementation of a new uniform fingerprinting rule, whose objective was to help guarantee the overall integrity of the INS and improve the customer service of the immigration process, many of my constituents have come to me seeking assistance or intervention with INS over fingerprinting problems. □ Fingerprint cards are being misplaced or separated from the applications and immigrants are being notified of fingerprinting appointments after the fact, or not at all. □ □ Also, due in part to processing delays and backlogs, the fifteen months that fingerprints are good for the purposes of processing an immigration application is often not sufficient time for INS to process applications. □ As a result, many immigrants are having to resubmit their fingerprints when the 15 months has expired to ensure that they have valid prints for the interview and adjudication parts of the process. □ This is causing much confusion for the applicants and is oftentimes delaying their applications. □ I look forward to working with you on either an administrative or legislative remedy to this problem.

Detention

As you know, the criteria, conditions and facilities under which immigrants are being detained is of paramount concern to me. □ As I stated in my June 29, 1999 letter, women and their children who are seeking asylum being detained in separate facilities is unacceptable and borders on inhumane. □ This detention system is inappropriate, fails to take into account the well being of the asylum seeker and certainly has the potential to cause permanent psychological damage to an infant or young child. The detention last summer of 89 Chinese asylum seekers in a maximum-security jail in Ullin highlighted the inappropriateness of our INS detention system. They were treated like criminals, enduring shackles and handcuffs, with little regard for their personal well-being. □ This was deplorable. □ We can and should do better when faced with such difficult cases. □ □

I was pleased to hear in your September 10, 1999, letter that women have been moved out of drunk tanks and small jails like Stone Park, which I had the opportunity to witness first hand, and into better facilities in county jails. □ However I still believe that the system is problematic. In that same letter, you acknowledge the difficult challenge of housing family groups, ie, women and children. □ Please explain to me what progress has been made with the Regional and Headquarters offices of Detention and Deportation, with respect to contracting a family housing facility for the Chicago area. □ Extraordinary effort must be made to ensure that women and children are not separated in detention facilities and that asylum seekers are not housed with criminals in jails. □ □ □

□ I understand that the American Bar Association and INS Headquarters are negotiating a set of standards for detainees under INS care. □ While I am anxious for the release of these standards, the key will be their implementation at the local level. □ I would appreciate meeting with you once they are published to discuss their implementation.

As you know, the 9th Congressional district serves as a gateway to America for immigrants from all parts of the globe. Every day these hardworking immigrants are embracing the challenges of their adopted nation and contributing to the vibrancy of our community. I trust that you and I agree that immigrants wishing to make America their home deserve fairness in our immigration policy and respect from those charged with helping them attain that dream.

As always, I thank you for your continued commitment and attention to these critical concerns. I hope that we can continue to work to address them to the best resolution of our constituents.

Sincerely,

Jan Schakowsky

Member of Congress